

Behind Digital Screen: A Thematic Analysis of Pornography Views in Malaysia's Youth

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19571> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19571

Published Date: 23 November, 2023

Abstract

Pornography consumption is a pervasive issue in contemporary society, with particular significance among student populations. Despite its ubiquity, the negative ramifications of pornography on various facets of life—mental health, relationships, and attitudes—remain largely underexplored, especially among students in South Asian contexts. The current study aims to fill this research gap by investigating the perceptions of first-year undergraduate students at a public university in Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, 21 students were invited to pen self-reflective papers on their views and experiences related to pornography consumption. These responses were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis, revealing four major themes: prevalence, motivators, impact, and potential solutions. The study confirmed that students generally perceive pornography to be highly prevalent, attributing its widespread use to a variety of factors such as easy accessibility via

digital platforms, emotional isolation, and stress. Students also expressed concerns about the detrimental impact of pornography on academic engagement and learning processes, mental health, and ethical standards. When it comes to mitigating these negative effects, participants displayed divergent viewpoints. Some students endorsed banning access to pornographic websites as a preventive measure, albeit with reservations regarding its efficacy. Others highlighted the importance of educational interventions and called for increased awareness among the student population concerning the detrimental effects of pornography. The insights derived from this research are discussed comprehensively in the subsequent discussion and conclusion sections, providing a valuable contribution to the existing literature, and offering a foundation for future scholarly endeavors and policy initiatives aimed at addressing this complex issue.

Keywords: Pornography Consumption, University Students, Perception, Malaysia, Qualitative Study

Introduction

Pornography, defined as material created with the intent to sexually arouse its audience through depictions of sexual activities such as vaginal or anal penetration, oral sex, and masturbation, has permeated various facets of modern society (McKee et al., 2020; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Its consumption is notably prevalent among students, as illustrated by research indicating that 93% of boys and 53% of girls have watched pornography in the last six months (Weber et al., 2012). Another study revealed that 80% of university students have encountered pornography at some point (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019).

Exposure to pornography can be classified into two types: intentional and unintentional. Prior studies have found that between 19% of boys aged 10-12 and up to 84% of boys and 60% of girls aged 16-17 have been unintentionally exposed to pornography (Flood, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2003). Conversely, 59% of students in 10th to 12th grade have sought out pornography deliberately (Chen et al., 2013). The consumption of pornography is not without its repercussions. Studies have linked it to a range of adverse effects, including diminished relationship satisfaction (Rasmussen, 2016), elevated levels of depression and anxiety (George et al., 2019), and more permissive sexual attitudes (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Lo & Wei, 2005; To et al., 2015). Furthermore, pornography has been correlated with increased engagement in sexual intercourse (Atwood et al., 2012; Bogale & Seme, 2014; Manaf et al., 2014) and casual sex (Cheng et al., 2014; Mattebo et al., 2014). Some research has even found associations between the consumption of violent pornography and instances of sexual assault (Ybarra et al., 2011; Bekele et al., 2011).

When it comes to predictors of pornography consumption, males are generally found to have a higher propensity than females (Holt et al., 2012; Mesch, 2009; Wolak et al., 2007). Qualitative research suggests that this gender discrepancy may be due to males using pornography for entertainment, curiosity, and even as a form of "social intercourse" among friends (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013; Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Rothman et al., 2015). Additionally, individuals with high sensation-seeking tendencies, low self-esteem, and poor self-control are often more likely to consume pornography (Beyens et al., 2015; Luder et al., 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Factors such as poor family communication and substance use have also been correlated with higher rates of pornography consumption (Ma & Shek, 2013).

Despite the wealth of quantitative data, there is a notable scarcity of qualitative studies focusing on students' perceptions of pornography, especially in non-Western contexts. Some

existing qualitative studies have examined the impact of pornography on individuals (Kohut et al., 2017; Razzaq & Rafiq, 2019; Shuler et al., 2021) or explored students' reflections on their pornography consumption (Böhm et al., 2015; Häggström-Nordin et al., 2006). However, these studies predominantly feature Western samples and lack a Southeast Asian perspective, particularly from Malaysia. Moreover, no study has investigated students' views on banning pornography websites.

To address these gaps, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' views on the prevalence of pornography among university students?
2. What do students believe motivates the consumption of pornography?
3. What are students' perceptions of the impact of pornography?
4. What solutions do students suggest that universities can implement to reduce the prevalence of pornography?

Methodology

In line with our research objectives, this study employs a qualitative research methodology, which facilitates a nuanced understanding of students' perceptions regarding the topic under scrutiny (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The chosen approach is especially suitable for delving into the complexities of attitudes and beliefs related to pornography consumption among university students.

Data Collection: The data were collected from first-year students at a public university in Malaysia. Participants were asked to compose a reflective paper addressing their viewpoints on pornography. This approach provides a platform for students to freely express their perspectives without the constraints that may accompany more structured methods. The reflection papers were structured around two guiding questions:

1. How prevalent do you think pornography is among university students?
2. Do you believe universities should censor or ban access to pornography?

Data Analysis: After gathering the reflective papers, we employed thematic analysis as our analytic framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and reflexivity, characteristics that allowed us to preserve the depth and richness inherent in the qualitative data. The analysis proceeded through several carefully considered stages:

1. Familiarization: The research team undertook multiple readings of the collected data to fully acquaint themselves with the content.
2. Initial Coding: We began by generating initial codes, attaching these to corresponding data segments that appeared to encapsulate key points or recurring ideas.
3. Refinement of Codes: Following the initial coding, the research team reviewed and, where necessary, merged, or deleted codes that were found to be repetitive or closely related.
4. Theme Development: Based on the refined codes, we identified initial themes that encapsulated the core ideas. These themes were then collectively discussed and vetted among the researchers involved in the study.
5. Reporting Findings: Finally, the established themes were presented in a coherent report that not only explored the subject matter comprehensively but also maintained the complexity and depth of the participants' perspectives.

Findings

After analyzing the data, we decided to present our findings under four main themes which are prevalence, motivators, impact, and solution.

Theme 1: Prevalence

Some students assert that pornography is pervasive among university populations. For instance, Student 3 contends that sexual content is widespread in universities, particularly among adolescents experiencing sexual curiosity. Other students argue that pornography has become normalized in contemporary society, especially in Western cultures. Student 13 estimates that approximately three out of ten students are addicted to pornography, a percentage that is expected to rise over time.

"In my opinion, sexual content in general is widespread in universities as students who are still in adolescence experience sexual curiosity" (Student 3)

"I believe that in general, pornography is a norm in society, more so among young adults in universities, especially on the western side of the globe" (Student 1)

"From my perspective, about 3 out of 10 students are found to be addicted to the internet, primarily for pornographic content. The percentage of students addicted to pornography is expected to rise" (Student 13)

On the flip side, students who perceive pornography as prevalent offer specific signs to support their observations. For example, Student 4 has identified the prevalence through subtle metaphors used in students' conversations. Another student notes that some peers speak and joke openly about sexual topics, which suggests a significant level of familiarity with the subject matter.

"But it's also very noticeable and can be discerned through conversations, actions, and the way they view others. Through such interactions, I've found that campus folks, like students, often describe vulgar elements in metaphors to keep it subtle for the listeners around, preserving face" (Student 4)

"However, some students are shamelessly or openly talking and joking regarding sexual topics among their friends which proves they know a lot about the subjects" (Student 2)

Conversely, some students assert that not everyone engages in the consumption of pornography. Student 4 underscores this point, and Student 7 believes that most university students abstain due to strong religious convictions that prohibit such behavior. Another student emphasizes the diverse levels of pornography consumption across university campuses and among individual students.

"Not all campus folks watch pornography, but some are addicted due to overpowering desires that dominate their minds. When they're addicted to porn exposure, they lean more towards the sexual, leading to mental and emotional issues" (Student 4)

"The majority of students on the University Campus do not engage in watching pornographic videos. This is because strong religious beliefs deter them from engaging in acts prohibited by their faith" (Student 7)

"However, it is vital to emphasize that the level of pornographic consumption varies greatly between individuals and among campuses. It is worth noting that the influence of pornography consumption on university campuses is still being debated" (Student 12)

Theme: Motivators

Many students attribute the ease of accessing pornography via Wi-Fi to increased consumption of pornographic content. Student 7 notes that advancements in technology have facilitated access to sexually explicit material through platforms like YouTube and other social media. Furthermore, Student 8 emphasizes the significant impact of easy internet access, which is often provided on campuses due to its necessity for academic and administrative functions.

“This occurs due to the advancement of technology that facilitates access to pornographic materials via mediums like YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms. Additionally, the influence of Western dramas they watch leads to an addiction to films with sexual content” (Student 7)

“In my opinion, it is undeniable that pornography is easily accessible and viewed on university campuses... Moreover, with the facilities provided by the University campus itself, such as granting internet access to students. As we know in this modern age, internet access is crucial for students and a university to assign tasks and share vital information” (Student 8)

“Furthermore, environmental factors like apps such as TikTok, which showcase viral content, make pornographic content more easily spread and found on University campuses” (Student 8)

Some students point out that feelings of isolation and lack of supervision can also contribute to increased consumption of pornography. They note that the privacy afforded by the internet and their living conditions allow students to explore such content without fear of being caught.

“The main reason for the prevalence of pornography among students is that they often feel isolated and do not socialize with others, making them susceptible to this issue” (Student 15)

“With the widespread availability of the internet and mobile devices, students can now access pornography from the privacy of their rooms or on their mobile devices. This has made it easier for students to engage with pornography, especially as they may feel more comfortable exploring their sexuality in private rather than in a public setting” (Student 21)

“The campus is a place where students live away from their original homes, making it easier for them to familiarize or lean towards pornography” (Student 15)

Another contributing factor identified by students is stress, often due to academic demands and poor living conditions. Students report resorting to pornography to relieve stress and cope with challenges.

“The context of problems is the assignments that must be done, the friends' circles, and sometimes our higher expectations. So, there are enough problems that are being faced by us as students. Being a student is always hectic, but this doesn't mean that we should start doing something wrong” (Student 6)

“Life at university can be hard, especially for those who live on campuses with various factors such as assignments, exams, lack of water, and terrible living conditions. Most students, especially males, need to relieve their stress caused by these factors, and one of the ways to do this is to watch pornography” (Student 17)

“In some ways, this also acts as a coping mechanism for students as they experience a stressful university life. With easy access to the internet, I believe

that university students may consider pornography a normal thing to consume”

(Student 3)

“Not only that, but the main reason students on campus get involved in the issue of pornography is due to mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression” (Student 15)

Students also explore pornography out of curiosity, influenced by their stage of hormonal development and the culture of sexual exploration often associated with university life.

“Peer influence and easy internet access further heighten students' curiosity about the world of pornography. Their decision to try watching explicit videos ultimately brings them to a different level of satisfaction than what they've felt before” (Student 15)

“It is normal for most students to act like this as the hormone levels in their bodies make them desire more sexual stimulation, as their bodies are growing, which is unavoidable for them” (Student 17)

“The culture of sexual exploration and experimentation that often comes with university life can also contribute to the spread of pornography. Many students are exploring their sexual identities and preferences for the first time and may turn to pornography to learn about different sexual acts and practices” (Student 21)

Peer influence was also highlighted as a considerable factor that leads students to engage in watching pornography.

“Moreover, they might be influenced by their peers who constantly urge them to watch pornography” (Student 11)

“One of the factors involved in the choice of friends at the University. This is because the choice of friends has a significant impact on a student's way of thinking, dressing, and speaking” (Student 8)

“Pornography often occurs due to influences from roommates who live together. This happens when one individual, influenced by outsiders, shows videos or pictures to others in the same room, leading them into the trap of pornography” (Student 15)

“Sometimes the platforms of pornography hubs are used by someone because they are likely telling themselves that ‘everyone is using it, so what if I use it or access it.’ So, generally, I feel that the pornography sites that are accessed by university students are higher” (Student 6)

Lastly, cultural factors also play a role. A liberal environment within the campus and a lack of religious grounding can influence students' choices to engage in consuming pornographic material.

“Moreover, the often liberal and open environment of campuses can make students feel more at ease to view explicit content without fear of judgment” (Student ??)

“A lack of religious grounding has led them to seek prohibited sources of income, making it a regular habit because of the thrill of earning significant amounts after uploading explicit videos, which become popular among many university students” (Student 13)

Theme 3: Impact

Students believe that exposure to pornography has a detrimental effect on their academic focus and prospects. Specifically, the consensus is that engaging with pornographic material can lead to a decrease in focus on studies and academic tasks, owing to the addictive nature of such content. The concern extends further, suggesting that this could jeopardize students' future opportunities.

"The effect of university students being exposed to pornography is a decrease in focus on learning and tasks as their thoughts are influenced by the addictive nature of pornography" (Student 4)

"Last but not least, much of the time we don't realize no matter whatever we do it is always going to affect our academic achievements" (Student 6)

"If pornography continues to spread in universities unhindered, it could jeopardize students' futures" (Student 11)

Additionally, students expressed concerns about the broader psychological and emotional implications of porn addiction. These include consequences such as insufficient sleep, reduced social interactions, and increased likelihood of depression. There are also warnings that pornography can impede mental growth and development, undermining self-confidence and hindering one's ability to engage in meaningful work and social interactions.

"Although a person starts to get addicted to pornography it might harm their thoughts and life in various ways such as lack of sleep, lack of socializing, and mental depression" (Student 5)

"Pornography is detrimental to the development of young adults. Exposure to pornography can hinder their brain development and contaminate their minds with negativity" (Student 11)

"Addiction to pornography disrupts the students' mental growth, including their emotional, social, cultural, and physical aspects" (Student 13)

"Addiction to pornography causes a lack of self-confidence and a poor ability to lead a meaningful work and social life. A survey of pornography addicts found that they disliked the feeling of being out of control and the waste of time caused by watching pornography" (Student 12)

Moreover, students pointed out that pornography could be responsible for a moral collapse among the student population. This, they argue, could lead to a degradation in how emotions like love are perceived, reducing them to mere physical acts. Such a collapse in moral values could make university campuses unsafe as students might act out on what they've seen in pornographic material.

"Porn can be a potent stimulation that causes lust in viewers. Addiction to pornography will cause the moral collapse of a university student" (Student 14)

"This is because pornography causes one's thoughts and actions to focus on negative behaviors, such as becoming unrestrained, neglecting their religious beliefs, and acting based on desires. Such actions lead to the weakening of one's religious beliefs, causing them to stray far from religion. The ban on pornography by the university also preserves the sanctity of Islam" (Student 7)

"Furthermore, having a porn addiction can change the person's rationality and moral values as they keep seeking more pleasure in it due to dopamine release and eventually desire to experience it or live up to their fantasy. This causes a dangerous environment for people around them as rape and sexual harassment may happen if the person cannot contain his sexual excitement or think rationally anymore" (Student 2)

“But unfortunately, when one is too keen on the pornography aspects, then they will take love and all other emotions for granted because pornography aspects are always teaching physical acts more than any emotional acts. So, in this term of this new generation, ‘love is sex’” (Student 6)

“There are also those who are addicted to watching explicit videos, making it a daily activity. Such behavior brings negative impacts, like engaging in casual sex due to the influence of the pornography” (Student 10)

“The likelihood of crimes like rape or sexual harassment could increase if pornography is allowed at universities. This poses a danger to students, especially females, as statistics indicate that rape or sexual harassment incidents usually target female students” (Student 11)

Besides these concerns, students also mentioned that pornography could distort their perceptions regarding sex, providing them with unrealistic and false expectations about sexual interactions.

“In addition to satiating their curiosity, students see pornographic media as a realistic representation of the adult world that they may use to practice for real life” (Student 9)

“Some claim that it can harm interpersonal relationships, and sex attitudes, and contribute to unreasonable expectations. Others believe that responsible usage and extensive sex education can help reduce any harmful consequences” (Student 12)

“Furthermore, pornography addiction affects a person's mental health. This is because it is easier for them to believe fake images and imagine porn videos” (Student 14)

Theme 4: Solutions

Students generally agree on the importance of restricting access to pornographic websites. However, some recognize that banning such sites will not eliminate the problem, although it may mitigate its prevalence to some extent. Different approaches were suggested, ranging from strengthening students' well-being to implementing educational programs that foster awareness about the impact of pornography.

“Universities can always ban access to pornography specifically in the usage of Wi-Fi available all around the campus, but those who are interested or addicted will always find a way to indulge in such cravings, due to being dependent on it, be it by using their connection through mobile data or by changing VPNs and such.... This is not to say that universities should let said materials be accessible instead, but by blocking porn sites when using its Wi-Fi connections, perhaps they could minimize the spread of NSFW content, as freshmen and undergraduates tend to rely on the free Internet connection to save their data connection, or to gain a faster network connectivity” (Student 1)

“So, the best way to prevent this from happening is to ban pornography in universities. They did this by blocking access to pornography sites if the user is using the university's Wi-Fi connection. However, this will not be able to prevent or stop the students from accessing it” (Student 2)

“The question of whether universities should ban pornography is a controversial topic requiring in-depth discussion. However, fundamentally, universities have a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure their campuses

are safe, comfortable, and of high moral standing for their students” (Student 18)

An alternative approach to combatting the widespread access to pornographic material is educational intervention. For example, universities can hold workshops and campaigns to inform students about the long-term impacts of engaging with such content. Creating communities and awareness programs to discuss pornography-related issues could also be beneficial.

“For example, there are a few steps to help reduce the prevalence of pornography such as individual thoughts, healthy education, and monitoring internet use. First and foremost, an individual perspective of handling explicit content as positive and negative is in their way of handling it” (Student 5)

“One approach could be to provide educational resources and programs that inform about the negative effects of pornography and teach how to access and use higher-quality, healthier content” (Student 18)

“Hence, aside from restricting access to multiple pornography sites, to create a healthier environment for young adults to grasp realistic sexual expectations, universities are encouraged to hold more educational activities such as booths and campaigns to help and guide university students in understanding the long-term impacts of pornography” (Student 2)

“Universities can also encourage students to form communities and awareness programs to address pornography-related issues on their campuses” (Student 18)

Moreover, it was suggested that universities could take a proactive role in keeping students' mental health in check. Offering counseling services could serve as a viable option for those who wish to seek help.

“Counseling and help from a professional could be of great help, especially in universities where there are students with diverse perspectives and attitudes towards pornography. By addressing the matter seriously and discreetly, universities can help provide an avenue for students to improve their mental health, especially when it comes to addictions like this one” (Student 5)

“Universities can also offer counseling services to help those who may be addicted or suffering from the psychological effects of pornography. This offers students a more confidential platform to discuss and deal with any porn-related issues they may be facing” (Student 13)

Discussion and conclusion

The study reveals that university students are acutely aware of the high prevalence of pornography consumption among their peers. Interestingly, some students observed that males are more prone to consuming pornography than females, corroborating earlier research (Holt et al., 2012; Lo et al., 1999; Rosenberg, 2011). These students cited a noticeable increase in sexually explicit conversations as a potential indicator of pornography consumption.

In addition, a significant number of students attribute the ubiquity of pornography consumption to the ease of internet accessibility, particularly when coupled with the lack of parental supervision. This perspective is in line with previous studies such as Buzzell (2005). Others opine that the surge of hormonal activity, inherent to adolescence and young

adulthood, acts as a catalyst for engaging in pornographic viewing, a sentiment also reflected in extant literature (Mitchell et al., 2007; Flood, 2007; Weber et al., 2012).

However, students emphasize that causality should not be hastily assumed. The interplay between hormonal changes and pornography consumption is complex; students often believe that maturation and the associated hormonal fluctuations drive an increased sexual curiosity, which is then satisfied through the abundant and discreet resources available online.

On the flip side, some students suggest that the academic and emotional pressures associated with university life could serve as motivators for consuming pornography as a stress-relief mechanism. This notion receives mixed support from academic research, with some studies affirming the link between stress and pornography (Bóthe et al., 2021), while others refute it (Chua, 2023).

An alternative viewpoint posits that weakening religious convictions and a more permissive societal atmosphere could contribute to increased pornography consumption. While the influence of religious affiliation in reducing pornography consumption is supported by several studies (Hardy et al., 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Rosenberg, 2011), evidence indicating that a liberal environment contributes to higher consumption is sparse.

Furthermore, students mentioned the psychological dimension, invoking the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) to explain the moral quandary that religious individuals may experience. Caught in a tension between their moral codes, which often condemn pornography and their behavior, these individuals have two ways to alleviate this dissonance. They could either cease the behavior that conflicts with their beliefs or adjust their belief systems to accommodate their behavior. This complex interplay could have far-reaching implications for the individual's spirituality and broader societal norms.

Students also touched upon the negative repercussions of pornography, such as deteriorating academic performance (Beyens et al., 2015; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021) and potential adverse impacts on mental health and moral values (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; George et al., 2019; To et al., 2015). Additionally, they discussed how pornography can distort perceptions of relationships and contribute to various forms of sexual aggression (Demaré et al., 1993; Hald et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2016).

While some students advocate for the outright banning of pornography sites to curb consumption, scholarly evidence supporting this tactic is lacking (Belo et al., 2010; Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019). Others argue for an educational approach, aligning with existing research that emphasizes informed decision-making (Chowdhury et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2022; Rostad et al., 2019).

In summary, the issue of pornography consumption among university students is a multifaceted problem warranting further scholarly investigation. While this study provides a comprehensive exploration of student perceptions, its qualitative nature limits its generalizability. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may affect the authenticity of the responses.

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